

# **Our School's Campaign to Accentuate the Positive**

**James H. VanSciver**

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*One high school decided to tackle education's "bad press" with simple, direct means. They used the local newspapers and radio stations to broadcast the good news about the school, and sent postcards to the parents whenever a student deserved a pat on the back.*

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Are you tired of hearing nothing but criticism of the schools? We are, at Sussex Central High School in Georgetown, Delaware, and we decided to do something about it.

We have set a program in motion. It doesn't cost much, and it doesn't take much time. Yet the results seem to be strongly positive.

First, we recognized that few people know what is really going on in our schools. Educators are partly to blame, for most of what we send home is negative: "Johnny was throwing food in the cafeteria;" "Sally was caught smoking;" "Billy skipped school."

The failure notices, the visiting teacher, or a phone call from the assistant principal asking why "Johnny" isn't in school are all negative messages from the school to the community. Small wonder why few who respond to surveys or questionnaires view their schools in a positive way!

And yet all these messages are directed at a relatively small and deviant portion of the school population. What of the rest of the students, silent by their conformity, obeying rules, being on time, and, most important, learning? We don't pay them much attention, send few letters to their homes, and rarely visit their parents.

## **The Campaign**

We want to change all that. We are launching a many-pronged program to recognize the positive contributions of this "silent majority."

We began with a stream of public service messages on the local radio stations. A different message is sent out each month, on careful driving, good reading habits, the true spirit of Christmas, and so on. Local disc jockeys are happy to fulfill their obligations for public service, and we have received a very favorable response from the listening audience. Each message ends with, "A public service message from your child's educators at Sussex Central High School in Georgetown."

Next, we handed out a supply of Delaware State Education Association "positive postcards" to each teacher to be mailed to the homes of students when they've done well. That way each staff member has an opportunity to reinforce individual students in a positive way; we hope this will balance the negative effects of "warning notices."

To further reach into the home, we have the teachers submit the names of students who are doing well in classes, athletics, or other activities. These names are sent to the assistant principal who then screens these students, gathers more information, and sends a personal positive letter to the parents of the student. We try to send at least ten letters home a week, and we have over 840 students in our school. This "Positive Family Contact" program has received overwhelming response from the community. With it,

we are trying to reach the average, everyday student who comes on time, reads library books, or just "does a good job." We think it's worth it. And parents do, too! We feel that by reinforcing more positive behavior, we may have less negative behavior to deal with.

We also contribute a weekly column to our local newspaper, entitled "Knight Watch" in honor of our mascots, the "Golden Knights." We use it to call attention to our students, staff members, and community boosters—those who are vital to our enjoying a positive school year.

The community now has a more accurate idea about what goes on in its schools, the positive as well as the negative. The response we've had shows that the results have been well worth the effort.

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